

Putting on a show



PHOTOS BY JAMES NOX/INDEPENDENT TRIBUNE

Jay Howard at JHE headquarters in Harrisburg. Howard's company puts together many of the pre-race concerts and events for Sprint Cup races around the country, including this weekend at Charlotte Motor Speedway.

Company builds big business staging pre-race festivities, concerts

BY MICHAEL KNOX
mknox@independenttribune.com

HARRISBURG — As the president of JHE Production Group, Jay Howard has planned events for the Democratic National Convention in Charlotte and on-track events for almost every NASCAR race, organized concerts for the Red Hot Chili Peppers and Bon Jovi and even spent some time with Willie Nelson.

Almost every time you turn on the TV to watch a NASCAR race there's a good chance you will see Howard's work.

As the owner and operator of the event planning company JHE Production Group, Howard's crew coordinates events on the track prior to races. They plan the on-track events for 33 of the 38 Sprint Cup races each year.

The flyovers, the pre-race concerts — Howard's company has a role in just about all of it.

But his work isn't limited to just NASCAR, and one event he still remembers fondly is organizing the 2003 Centennial Flight at Kitty Hawk.

Howard found himself briefing astronauts Buzz Aldrin and Neal Armstrong about the order of events for going out on the stage.

"I stood up in front of the room and about couldn't talk," Howard said.



Every year, JHE produces the NASCAR Sprint Pit Crew Challenge, which showcases the top crews in the sport.

Despite his connection to so many celebrities, Howard is a down-to-earth guy with a humble nature who doesn't display the type of personality who has hung out with major talent. Howard, a 1980 graduate of Concord High School, went to Appalachian State University,

where he graduated in 1984. But he was already laying the groundwork for his career in 1981 when he worked for legendary NASCAR promoter Humpy Wheeler during the summer.

See **SHOW**, Page 6A



JAMES NIX/INDEPENDENT TRIBUNE

Jay Howard at JHE headquarters in Harrisburg. Howard's company puts together many of the pre-race concerts and events for Sprint Cup races around the country, including this weekend at Charlotte Motor Speedway.

Show

From Page 1A

Wheeler and Howard's father had known each other for years, and Wheeler gave Howard his start in event planning. The connection would eventually help Howard launch JHE Production Group in 1987.

"Any small business that is in a similar field as us, believe it or not, if it's an entrepreneurial-based firm, it started with the guy that's in charge of the business being a grunt somewhere," Howard said. "How many CEOs started in the mail room? Because the person that's got the best chance to succeed is the one that knows the business from the ground up."

Howard's company now has 80 full-time employees. Howard's growth

"I never said, 'I want to have all my work in NASCAR.' That's just where all the opportunities were. And any entrepreneur is, quite frankly, not in a position to be choosy about what direction there company goes. You go where the opportunities present themselves."

Jay Howard,
president of JHE Production Group

stemmed from him landing several NASCAR gigs that snowballed into more and more work.

"I never said, 'I want to have all my work in NASCAR.' That's just where all the opportunities were," Howard said. "And any entrepreneur is, quite frankly, not in a position to be choosy about what direction there company goes. You go where the opportunities present themselves."

With pursuing opportunities, Howard also strives to keep a comfortable work environment

for his employees. The business is pet friendly—Howard often brings in his own rescue dog, Bert, to hang out. During our interview with Howard, Bert laid sprawled out on the couch, content to be around Howard.

"Bert will follow him to meetings, too," said Crystal Emerick, who handles Howard's public relations. "So if Jay leaves to go to another room, here comes Bert."

On Howard's office door is a name tag designating it as his office, but there is also a spot for Bert on the

door, with Bert and Howard "sharing" an office. At the Howard home, he and his wife Kim have three dogs, three horses, a pony, a miniature donkey, cats and other animals.

Bert escapes the menagerie at least once a week to spend time with Howard at JHE Production Group.

Howard also strives to maintain an environment employees want to work in.

Just one thing he does for his employees is he organizes a big Christmas bash each year and last year he brought in the rock band Foreigner to perform for his staff.

"Invest in your people and it will better your product, it will drive your profit, which will allow you to invest in people," Howard said. "And it's not any more complicated than that."

Contact Michael Knox
at 704-789-9133.